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Was Lohia Parochial and Monolingual?

YOGENDRA YADAV

Rammanohar Lohia has been incorrectly portrayed as a *Hindiwalla* and a Hindi chauvinist. A perusal of his writings on the language subject clearly shatters such a portrayal.

In an otherwise interesting comment on Ramachandra Guha's article on the rise and fall of the bilingual intellectual, Sudhanva Deshpande ("Bilinguism, Theatre and the Fate of the Vernacular", EPW, 5 September 2009) chides Guha for thinking of Rammanohar Lohia as a bilingual political intellectual. He writes:

> ... while Lohia himself was multilingual, his movement was trenchantly monolingual – so that socialists of that type, even outside north India, somehow thought of Hindi as being automatically lingua franca. So, in that sense, Lohia vis-à-vis language is a bit like Jinnah vis-à-vis religion – cosmopolitan in personal life, parochial in public!

Strong words! And perhaps an ingenuous interpretation. But how well does it fit in with what Lohia said and did on this issue? This point is worth discussing, if only because Deshpande has reiterated – somewhat colourfully – a misrepresentation of Lohia's thinking on the language question very common among the left intellectual circles. Lohia is seen as a Hindi supremacist and a linguistic chauvinist who did not understand the complexities of nation-building in a multilinguistic country. The trouble is that no one cares to give any historical evidence for such a serious criticism. Nor does Deshpande, perhaps because this point is marginal to his article.

Let us look at some of the relevant evidence. Deshpande acknowledges that Lohia was multilingual: he was fluent in Hindi, Bengali, English and German. He perhaps also knows that Lohia saw himself as a true cosmopolitan, and not just in personal life – as someone who dreamt of a world without passports and visas. Prima facie, then, any kind of chauvinism would be an oddity in his thought. But as Deshpande rightly says, the point is to ask what Lohia stood for in politics.

Did Lohia stand for linguistic chauvinism? For this we need not go by hearsay; Lohia took pains to clarify his position on this subject "so that should criticism or ridicule be still poured on them, it should at least be well founded". Most of his writings, speeches and statements on this subject are compiled in a small book (*Language*, Hyderabad: Rammanohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyasa, second edition, 1986). Let us hear Lohia summarising his own views on this subject:

> English does harm to India not so much because it is foreign but because it is in the Indian context feudal. Only a tiny minority of 1% of the population achieves such efficiency in the language to be able to use it for power or profit. To this tiny minority, English is an instrument of domination and exploitation over the vast masses. ... When we say 'banish English', we certainly do not wish to banish it from England or America, nor even from India's colleges, if it is an optional subject. There is no question of banishing it from the libraries (ibid: 67).

It should not be hard for left intellectuals to see that his case against English was not based on any claim for the intrinsic superiority of Hindi, but came from the standpoint of equality.

Was the anti-English campaign aimed at establishing Hindi in the same hegemonic position? Lohia clarified repeatedly that he was for "Removal of English, Not the Establishment of Hindi" (title of his essay in 1958) because for him the real question was "Feudal Language versus People's Languages" (title of another essay in 1962). "The war of the Socialist Party on English is for the sake of the mother tongue, which means Oriya, Bengali, Tamil and Telugu, as much as Hindi" (ibid: 80). The focus of much of his writing is on how the dominance of English has led to loss of self-confidence and unequal opportunities for the masses and has dwarfed the Indian mind. He argues passionately that Indian languages, not just Hindi, are adequate to the task and can be further refined only if we start using them. He identified state patronage and school education as the key to rejuvenation of Indian languages. All this was not confined to the subtleties of Lohia's writings but duly echoed in all the resolutions of the Angrezi Hatao Sammelans that he instituted (ibid: 85-90, 101-09).

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Indeed, much of what Deshpande says later in his article in defence of Left Front's policy of education in mother tongue in West Bengal could draw upon what Lohia said on this very matter in 1958:

> Bengali should be increasingly taught in Bengal. It must become the medium of instruction for Bengali children. But non-Bengali children must also be equally conceded the right to have their education in their own mother tongues. In Bihar, especially in Manbhum and Purnea areas, Hindi is imposed on Bengali students. Halt this Hindi chauvinism (ibid: 15-16).

It is hard to see such statements as instances of parochialism in public life.

Did Lohia not believe in a special status of Hindi vis-à-vis other Indian languages? Indeed he did. Following Gandhi, he believed that Hindustani, Hindi and Urdu are three different names for the same language. Like Gandhi again he believed that Hindi understood in this sense (used in a popular, non-Sanskritic register which can absorb foreign words easily) had a special status and should become India's national language. But he went out of his way to address the sensibilities of non-Hindi speakers. When he proposed Hindi as the language of the union government, he also proposed that all central government jobs should be reserved for non-Hindi speakers to ensure that they do not face denial of equal opportunity. The other option he proposed was that of a multilingual (sans English) centre or a bifurcation of the working of central government into Hindi and English department. The details or the feasibility of these schemes need not detain us here. One could argue that these did not meet the sensibilities of the non-Hindi speakers. Indeed Lohia's politics of language demands a serious review of the kind his followers have never attempted. But to see this as simple-minded parochialism is to misunderstand what needs to be criticised in the first place.

If he was not a Hindiwalla, was he at least seen to be one by non-Hindi intellectuals? Sure, the Dravida Kazhagam did see him as that. But there is little evidence to my knowledge of opposition to Lohia among non-English speaking intellectuals of other Indian languages. On the contrary, Lohia inspired a generation of non-Hindi writers and thinkers. To take Kannada as an example, the names of U R Ananthamurthy, Lankesh, Devanur Mahadeva and D R Nagaraj come to mind immediately. It would be hard to imagine that these self-respecting Kannada intellectuals were inspired by the ideology of Hindi supremacy.

Finally, did Lohia's followers quite follow his ideas in the same spirit or did it degenerate into Hindi chauvinism in practice? Questions of this kind always involve complex judgments, but on balance it must be said that this is not one of the many weaknesses of Lohiaites. Deshpande and many left intellectuals overlook the fact that much of electoral and cultural politics of the socialist movement in north India developed in opposition to the Jan Sangh's brand of Hindu and Hindi chauvinism. The socialists evolved a different register of Hindi, precisely in opposition to the highly sankritised Hindi of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The political need to distance themselves from the Jan Sangh and then the Bharatiya Janata Party meant that the socialists of the Lohia tradition have by and large maintained a distinction between opposing English and imposing Hindi.

None of the points I have made here are new or novel or hidden in the archives. It is surprising and indeed very sad that left intellectuals like Deshpande have continued to participate in somewhat pointless polemic of a bygone era, just as some socialists have continued their knee-jerk anti-Marxist polemic. The real loss is not that such a gross misrepresentation does violence to our intellectual history, or does injustice to a historic figure like Lohia. The real tragedy is that this narrow-mindedness shrinks the intellectual resources available to radical cultural politics. Activists and scholars like Deshpande, who evidently take radical cultural politics seriously, might wish one day to turn to Lohia's multilayered and radical engagement with symbols, cultures and languages of India. They might discover that this was one of the few attempts of its kind within the socialist-communist politic in India in the 20th century. This point may be worth a thought in this birth centenary year of Rammanohar Lohia.

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